

St. Marys River Testimony
Natural Resources, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation Standing Committee
Rep. Frank Foster, Chairperson

By Cathy Abramson, Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians,
Sault Ste. Marie, 23 September 2011

I am Cathy Abramson, an elected council member of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians. I have come to inform you about the pollution of our lands and waters and to ask for your assistance to jointly tackle this problem.

You have heard of this problem before. It has been an issue for a very long time – it has been documented for at least three decades and began long before that.

I am speaking of the problem of Canadian sewage fouling the beaches of Sugar Island. The Sault Tribe has members affected by this problem, and you have constituents and citizens affected, so this is a problem we all share. The Sault, Canada East End Water Pollution Control Plant (sewage plant) has been identified as one of the three main point source discharges to the St. Marys River, leading to the River's being designated an Area of Concern (AOC).

We have participated on the Binational Public Advisory Council, seeking action by the Canadian municipality, and at the same time working with many agencies to implement solutions to the pollution of the river. Our tribal fishers are the main participants in the St. Marys River fishery, and so we are concerned with all pollutants in Lake Superior and the river, not only the sewage discharge. But the sewage remains the most frustrating.

I have personally been to the White House and our Congressional offices and EPA office in Washington, D.C., to show the federal government and officials our plight, unfortunately with few results. In order to get better results, we **must** work together to solve this problem.

The first East End sewage plant was built in 1961. In 1992, the plant was described in the Remedial Action Plan as a major source of pathogens, nutrients, oil, grease, and other pollutants to the river.

Upgrades to the plant were carried out from 2003 to 2006 and it is now a secondary treatment plant with UV disinfection, and also has a large sewage overflow holding tank. Yet the problems persist.

E. Coli contamination of our beaches continues after nearly every rain event in summer. Despite the holding tank, we still receive frequent notifications of sewage bypasses – the most recent one was the day before yesterday! Sewage bypassed that plant starting at 11:21 Wednesday morning, and as of 2:07 in the afternoon when we received the call, it was still ongoing. In 2011, after decades of this problem, this is still happening!

We know there is an ongoing problem with stormwater/sanitary system tie-ins. Homes on the Canadian side built before 1968 are permitted to have their sumps tied in to their sanitary systems – this

means that during a rain event, stormwater is going into the sanitary system. In addition, aging pipes throughout the city streets allow stormwater infiltration. So, their big tank they put under Bellevue Park is inadequate. We still see bypasses during heavy rains. They tell us that even during bypasses, the discharge has received primary treatment and disinfection, but this cannot be. We are seeing Canadian bathroom trash washed up on our beaches.

The Chippewa County Health Department has sampled the beaches on Sugar Island, and repeatedly reports high E. coli levels and posted the beaches, for no body contact. This past summer the beaches in the area were frequently closed because of high bacterial loads, often in advance of long weekends! This isn't just frustrating, it's dangerous since many Sugar Island residents still drink well water and some wells come directly from the river.

The St. Marys River is part of our lives and culture — it's our heritage. For generations, our families swam, fished and hunted all along the river, and yet our grandchildren who live there now can't even go in the water.

We know that the problems have several causes. There is historic contaminated sediment in the riverbed, caused by over a century of dumping untreated sewage and 40-plus years of dumping only primary treated sewage. This has not been cleaned up despite having been identified more than twenty years ago.

There is uncontrolled storm water discharge from both cities, washing fecal matter and many other pollutants into the river during rain events — that is even less straightforward to solve, but we are working with local partners on it through a recent proposal to the Michigan DEQ to address nonpoint source pollution from Ashmun Creek. The City of Sault Ste. Marie is doing extensive work on the storm sewers also, as you might have noticed with all the construction downtown.

But the third issue is the one that has us really angry and baffled. There is a continuing source of Canadian raw sewage and bathroom trash washing up on Sugar Island beaches. Sanitary products wrappers with both Canadian official languages have been identified, as well as numerous other items typically flushed in toilets. The Canadian authorities tell us this cannot be coming from their plant, but if not there, where is it coming from?

I'm attaching a 2009 report on conditions in the river, documenting all of these details, for your reference. Perhaps you've already seen this material. In it, you will see efforts by citizens and elected officials at all levels to address the problem, reaching a peak in 2006 with a petition, a lawsuit, and letters from Sen. Carl Levin to the EPA and from Ontario's Tony Martin to the Canadian Environment Minister. Five years later we still have these problems!

We are far down the road of identifying and talking about it. We appreciate you coming here and listening to us but we need action!